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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 000839

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SUBJECT: ITALY: CL PARLIAMENTARIAN PREDICTS CONTINUITY IN
FOREIGN POLICY

REF: ROME 584

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald P. Spogli for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Marco Minniti, a former U/S of Defense under center-left (CL) Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, termed Berlusconi's relationship with the U.S. an asset that should be built upon and said there is no European security without the U.S. Minniti continued that the center-left is now in substantial agreement with the general lines of the current government's policy on Iraq, and he speculated that Italy could leave a small military contingent in Iraq for training and civilian force protection beyond the end of 2006. Minniti called for a larger role for Italy in the Joint Strike Fighter, increased U.S.-Italian military technology transfers and said the Union platform's reference to military basing is not targeted at the U.S. or NATO. Minniti said Iran is the major foreign policy challenge on the horizon which must be confronted by a united international community. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Pol M/C and Poloff met March 13 with Democrats of the Left (DS) Member of Parliament and former U/S to the Council of Ministers and in the Ministry of Defense Marco Minniti. The meeting was friendly, and Minniti frequently commented proudly on the positive working relations he had developed with U.S. officials during the Balkan crisis. The son of an Italian air force pilot, Minniti's office was covered with models of military aircraft and NATO memorabilia, which he admitted put off some of his more dovish colleagues.

BUILDING ON BERLUSCONI'S FOREIGN POLICY

13. (C) Pol M/C opened the substantive component of the meeting expressing concern that the Union platform downplayed the Transatlantic Alliance (REF A). Minniti responded unequivocally that there is no European security without the U.S. and dismissed any concept of competition between the U.S. and Europe. He predicted no significant change in Italy's attitude toward NATO. Unprompted, Minniti lauded the close relations that PM Berlusconi has built with the U.S. and called that relationship "an asset that should not be wasted."

14. (C) Minniti said Italy's foreign policy establishment is mostly bipartisan and noted that the center-left's (CL) reformist parties form the core of the coalition and understand the need for Italy, as a country, to maintain a relatively coherent foreign policy. Minniti predicted that far-left parties would not be involved in foreign policy. He continued that Communist Renewal (RC) Party leader Fausto Bertinotti was committed to being in the government and would not repeat his previous mistake of causing Romano Prodi's government to fall over a budgetary issue. Accordingly, Minniti believes Bertinotti will focus on domestic issues.

CARABINIERI COULD REMAIN IN IRAQ

15. (C) Calling Italy's troop deployment in Iraq a "commitment acquired by the State," Minniti assured Pol M/C that a CL government would act responsibly. He said the CL was in substantial agreement with the current government's policy--i.e., reducing Italy's troop presence in Iraq throughout the course of the 2006 while continuing to favor a civilian commitment in the future. Again unprompted, he said the CL would consult closely with the U.S. and Iraqi government on all aspects of Italian troop deployments.

16. (C) Qualifying it as a personal view with some currency inside the DS but not the agreed policy of the Union coalition, Minniti said he could imagine a contingent of Carabinieri remaining in Iraq beyond the withdrawal of regular forces in order to continue the training of Iraqi security forces and to provide security for Italian civilian operations in Iraq.

MORE FOR AFGHANISTAN AND THE BALKANS

17. (C) Minniti said that Italy would maintain, and perhaps, increase its commitments to the Balkans and Afghanistan, subject to the limits of Italy's already overstretched military capacity. He promised close cooperation with the U.S. on these matters and raised the possibility of an increase in Italy's deployment in Afghanistan as compensation for withdrawals from Iraq.

MILITARY BASING/TECH TRANSFER AND THE JSF

18. (C) Pol M/C questioned Minniti about references to the review of Italy's military basing (servitu militare) in the Union platform. Minniti responded clearly that this refers to a review of the unequal distribution of Italy's military bases throughout the country, especially the heavy burden carried by Sardinia. He said that 80 percent of Italy's firing ranges are located in Sardinia, for example, and that the locals want their relative burden reduced. He said the U.S. decision to leave the Italian base at La Maddalena had had a positive effect. Minniti assured Pol M/C that the reference has nothing to do with the presence of NATO or U.S. troops in Italy and said if any future issues came up, they would be addressed in close coordination with the U.S., e.g., through joint commissions.

19. (C) Poloff pressed Minniti on the positions of pacifists within the Union coalition who oppose Italy's membership in NATO. Minniti admitted reluctantly that the language in the platform was written sufficiently vaguely so that pacifists could claim to their small constituency that they had put on the table discussion of military basing in Italy. However, he minimized the importance of these groups; confirmed the CL's commitment to NATO; and promised that the U.S. would be closely consulted on every aspect of any process that might affect U.S. interests.

10. (C) Minniti called for closer Transatlantic cooperation in the defense industry and noted that he personally had signed the accord affirming Italy's commitment to the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). He called for an increased role for Italian industry in the JSF.

11. (C) Minniti recalled proudly that the Italian Ministry of Defense was on the verge of signing what he called a very expansive military technology transfer agreement with the Pentagon at the end of the government led by Massimo D'Alema. He expressed what appeared to be a personal desire to renew negotiations on that agreement.

STAYING UNITED ON IRAN

12. (C) Pol M/C raised the importance of the international community remaining united against Iran's attempts to obtain nuclear technology and said that Italy's commercial ties to Iran mean it has an important role to play. Minniti said he expected Iran's quest for nuclear technology to be the primary foreign policy challenge to face the next government. He said Iran must be contained with a credible threat but termed a military solution difficult. He said the U.S. and EU must remain in close contact on this issue, as must the U.S. and Italy.

COMMENT

13. (C) COMMENT: Minniti is clearly nostalgic for the days when he personally coordinated Italy's military involvement in the Balkans with the U.S. and NATO. He seemed pleased to be once again engaged by the U.S. government and is hoping for a senior position in a future CL government. His views are further evidence that reformist elements of the Daisy and DS parties hope to steer a foreign policy that builds on Berlusconi's success. To be sure, Prodi's EU bias still presents a challenge and the potential influence of the far-left remains unknown, but the CL contains people like Minniti with whom we can work. END COMMENT.
SPOGLI